

A Brief History of Radio at UAlbany

Written and edited by Marc Gronich and other radio alums

2003 marks two noteworthy milestones in UAlbany's long and illustrious history of student-run radio broadcasting. It has been a quarter-century since **WCDB 91FM** first took to the Capital District airwaves, and 40 years since its predecessor, **WSUA 640AM**, began informing and entertaining students.

Both stations' roots extend back to even earlier days. Three dates stand out in the annals of radio broadcasting at the State University of New York at Albany:

- Thursday, March 2, 1939
- Friday, February 22, 1963
- Wednesday, March 1, 1978

The genesis of campus radio at UAlbany occurred on **Thursday, March 2, 1939, at 4pm**, with a remote broadcast – over WOKO (1460AM) – that originated from **Room 207 of Draper Hall** on the original academic campus. It began with a speech by **Dr. Abram Brubacher, President of State College for Teachers**, and was followed by a five-scene dramatization of the college's early days. Playing of the school's alma mater closed the half-hour program.

The broadcast on March 2 came to fruition soon after President Brubacher and some of the faculty realized that equipment from the speech department, used to correct prospective teachers' speech difficulties – recording machines, microphones and a soundproof room giving the best acoustic effects possible – could also be put to use to broadcast over the air. Though President Brubacher died shortly afterwards in 1939, remote broadcasts via WOKO continued until the early 1940s when World War II led to its suspension.

Talk about a campus radio station resumed in the late 1940s with the formation of the **University Radio Council**, created to make this dream a reality. It gave rise to plans for what would become WSUA, the anticipation of which received prominent mention during the 1950s in many of the school's yearbooks. WCFA and WSCA were other early possibilities considered for station call letters.

During WSUA's long gestation another much larger transition took place. In 1962, the school was designated one of four University Centers and its name was changed from the State College for Teachers to the State University of New York at Albany. **Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller** put his imprimatur on the name change in his budget message of 1963.

During the long reign of SUNY Chancellor **Dr. Samuel Gould**, WSUA began to crystallize. Legend has it that Gould was infuriated that the Albany campus lacked a radio station when other college's promoted their own.

WSUA began at the State University of New York at Albany (known as "Albany State") on **Friday, February 22, 1963**, making 2003 the 40-year reunion for WSUA personalities and station executives. WSUA's constitution declared its original purpose "to contribute more effective communication to the student body by broadcasting musical entertainment and useful information of, for and by State students."

WSUA was a carrier-current radio station. Its signal was "piped" into campus dormitory electrical systems. Programs could only be heard mainly within the confines of university residence buildings. At its inception the school newspaper described the radio station as broadcasting on "the FCC assigned frequency of 640 kilocycles on a closed circuit carrier current of **eight watts**."

Bill Alexander and **Don Allen** are given much of the credit for bringing WSUA into existence from the Radio Council, with **Dr. Anthony Salatino** as the faculty advisor during the early 1960s. Bill was the acting General Manager during the transition year and Don was appointed General Manager in February 1963.

Elections were held on Thursday, May 2, 1963. **Nicholas Argyros** and **Ron Campisi** were the station's first elected General Manager and Assistant General Manager, respectively.

The station had a humble beginning. It was located in a hallway broom closet in **Brubacher Hall** on what is today “the downtown campus” or Alumni Quad. (**Brubacher Hall** is now under the auspices of the College of Saint Rose.) It is only fitting that since President Brubacher conceived the idea of radio on campus that the radio station would be housed in a building named in his memory.

Argyros and Campisi fielded an executive team with titles we might find surprising according to today’s conventions. The first executive team included **Ian Leet**, program director; **Gerry Terdiman**, financial director; **Duane White**, technical director; **Tom Rywick**, publicity director; **George Ashley**, librarian; **Ron Walter**, news director; and **Linda Delfs**, secretary. There were multiple music directors during the early years, namely **Tom Alexander**, classical music; **Skip Schreiber**, popular music; **Dave Hughes**, show music; and **Art Loder II**, movie scores. David Hughes was the host of WSUA’s maiden broadcast. Dave remembers when the station was dubbed “The Fry Pan Network” with 640 being the temperature for cooking ham.

The original equipment for WSUA came from surplus material at General Electric, which then owned Schenectady-based WGY radio and television. Assisting WSUA with obtaining and maintaining the original equipment was WGY’s chief engineer, Herb Cole. Another supporter of the carrier-current effort was Steve Seiden of Seiden Sound, an electronics store in Albany. Steve’s firm installed the complete closed-circuit radio station for \$500, which was eventually funded by the University Administration and the Student Senate.

WSUA’s chief engineer, **Duane White**, says most of the equipment was considered outdated and useless junk. The actual provider of the handmade transmitter and splitters installed on the main power box in each of the dorms around Alumni Quad was the Lafayette Radio store, located on Central Avenue in Albany. Staff members built a wooden U-shaped console with left and right arms belt-driven turntables. In the center of the console sat a genuine public address system like others the store sold to educational institutions. According to White, “anyone who had ever seen a professional setup would just grin and smile at our definitely amateur equipment.” Amateur or not, the console had the necessary multiple inputs for microphone, turntables and tape deck, and produced an audio out that was fed into a broadcast transmitter.

Programming in the early years featured news, sports and, of course, music with heavy emphasis on folk, jazz, bluegrass, pops, classical and swing, as well as on movie and Broadway show tunes. A memorable story from WSUA’s early history concerns a student disc jockey who returned from a vacation with a “bootleg” recording of music he had heard in a West German pub, performed by a band from Liverpool, England. WSUA did not play rock and roll in 1963. Still, the student D.J. played the song for the student listeners and was promptly bounced from the station for breaking format. Management could not have known at the time that the violation of station policy bestowed on WSUA the distinction of being the first radio station in the United States to have played a **Beatles** song to a wide audience.

While WSUA initially shunned rock and roll, most station members eventually realized that attracting student listeners would necessitate adopting a Top 40 format. Soon after **Duane White** was elected the station’s second General Manager, he instituted a Top 40 music schedule for prime times. “Real” music was relegated to non-prime times. Duane remembers being in the Brubacher Hall closet when the golden voice of **Ron Campisi** inaugurated the new format starting out with the Beatles song “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” Another notable WSUA accomplishment was its news department’s extensive coverage of the 1964 presidential election, which received national attention.

In the mid-60s, WSUA moved from a cramped Brubacher broom closet to comparatively more spacious and professional studios off the Brubacher Hall basement-lounge, near the Student Union. The new facilities included a room for news and production, a separate D.J. booth, a master control room, and a lobby that contained space for the station’s sizable record album library. WSUA’s executive offices occupied three rooms on Brubacher Hall’s first floor.

Between 1965 and 1971, WSUA rolled out its carrier-current signal to the uptown quads, beginning with Dutch Quad. A buzz had always afflicted WSUA's on-air sound (due to the carrier-current transmission of the station's signal over electrical wires). In addition, the carrier-current signal leaked, and occasionally, particularly when it rained, you actually could hear the station outside, over the air, on and near most of the uptown and downtown campuses. In 1975, WSUA began using "**Buzz Along With Us**" as the radio station's slogan, popularized and created, in part, by **Joel Feld**.

WSUA PROGRAMMING HIGHLIGHTS

For much of the mid- to late-60s – through the end of Station Manager **Wayne Fuller**'s term in 1969 – WSUA's sound was heavily defined by a popular Top 40 format, characterized by heavy use of pre-recorded jingles and weekly countdowns. Progressive rock music was first introduced to station listeners in earnest in 1968. Within two years, the more sophisticated progressive rock format – then sometimes called "FM music" – pushed aside Top 40 as WSUA's dominant sound.

By the close of the 1960s, thanks mainly to assiduous efforts of Music Director **Lewis "Skip" Fischer** (bolstered by another Music Director, **Keith Mann**), WSUA had amassed an unrivaled record library, partially from records obtained from SUNY Binghamton. At the time, it was considered the largest collection of 45s and albums in the nation. Skip Fischer's example and leadership was also instrumental in establishing high standards for the quality and professionalism of music, news and public affairs programming at WSUA.

WSUA offered sport fans its first live coverage of Great Danes basketball games in 1968, and of Great Danes football games in 1970. In 1969, WSUA mounted live reporting of anti-war demonstrations in Albany and Washington, D.C. In 1970, 24-hour programming was introduced, albeit only while school was in session and some of the programming was prerecorded.

In 1970, ***Saturday Night of Gold*** debuted. It quickly became one of the more popular programs of its day and over the years acquired legendary status on campus. **Eric Lonschein** first hosted the show and was succeeded by **Andy Baum** and **Glen Trotiner**.

A popular program during much of the 1970s was a daily half-hour news report entitled ***Ear-witness News***, which began its broadcasts on Groundhog Day, **February 2, 1973**, with **Dave Keller**, **Doug Lewanda** and **Harvey Kojan**. During the later 70s, **Mark Plevin** and **Anita Unterweiser** added their special technique to this program.

WSUA also became one of the first college radio outlets to provide live, remote coverage of professional sporting events. On **Saturday, February 21, 1976**, **Nate Salant** and **Michael "Sky" Curwin**, co-starring **Anita Unterweiser**, as the board operator, inaugurated broadcasts of New York Islanders NHL hockey games from Long Island's Nassau Coliseum. Chief Engineer **Ira Goldstein** made sure the games were carried over the Uniondale-to-Albany linkup. The crew broadcast eight games over a six-week period the first season. On more than one occasion, a fellow radio station member would use the tie-line, 457-6447, in the middle of the Islander game, knocking the game off the air.

Rich Stevens and **Chris Walters** recorded a famous long-running station ID: *WSUA Albany, Subsidized Completely By Student Tax, Paid to the Student Association of the State University of New York at Albany*. It was played at the top of every hour for many years by order of Student Association.

GETTING THE STATION FROM AM

TO FM

Serious discussions began in 1968 (and possibly earlier) to develop a strategy for securing authorization and funding for an FM license that would permit reaching a much larger audience – in stereo and with less static – through over-the-air broadcasting. In 1970, soon to retire SUNY Chancellor Samuel Gould floated the idea of a University-wide radio network, which never materialized. Anticipating eventual success, Program Manager **Joel Lustig** and Chief Engineer **Larry Serafini**, in the 1970-1971 school year, oversaw the design of detailed University-drawn blueprints and specifications for new WSUA studios and a future FM operation that would someday be housed in a West Podium Extension, which was never built. The plans contemplated retaining the AM carrier-current operation, partly for training and development of new on-air talent. A myriad of difficulties ensued during that time with much student unrest amid the war in Vietnam and a financial scandal at WSUA among them, which blocked success in obtaining an FM license for another decade.

The financial scandal rocked WSUA soon after the start of the fall 1970 semester. In the wake of alleged mismanagement of funds, the station was placed under strict financial supervision for six months by student government, which launched an investigation. Some student government representatives called for shutting down the station. WSUA's budget was frozen during the probe. To continue operating, WSUA management requested \$50 from each member. The station was eventually censured for mischaracterizing in its budget a signal generator that, in fact, was a remote-controlled airplane. It had been purchased in the summer of 1970 to promote the station on campus. The dustup was fueled partly by long-running opposition to the station by a few elected student government representatives. To unfreeze the station's budget, Student Association required that WSUA be physically closer to the student government, which by then had operated for several years from the new uptown campus. Though some old-timers had hoped to remain downtown – farther from Student Association scrutiny and the less bucolic campus podium – station management consented. Space for WSUA was secured in the Campus Center and a supplemental budget of \$22,000 for the move and new equipment was approved.

The summer of 1971 marked the bittersweet end of one era and the start of another. Aided by an earlier Chief Engineer **Robert Heaney**, General Manager **Joel Lustig**, Chief Engineer **Steve “Arbuckle” Eckert** and News Director **Littleton Harmon “Andy” Smith II** shuttered WSUA's downtown studios and offices. At the same time, they designed and constructed new facilities in Rooms 316 and 320 on the third floor of the uptown Campus Center. The final song played from WSUA's downtown studios was *Get Together* by **The Youngbloods**.

Station members returned for the fall semester in 1971 to a new more modern and relatively palatial facilities in the heart of the uptown campus. That same year, for the first time, WSUA filled its schedule with live broadcasts 24 hours a day.

Following completion of the move uptown in 1971, intense efforts were renewed to obtain authorization for an FM license by General Manager **Joel Lustig**. Subsequently, during their respective tenures as General Manager, **Littleton Harmon “Andy” Smith II** and **Eric Lonschein** picked up the challenge and pushed the FM project along to bring the radio station into the 20th century. But opposition from the University administration proved decisive.

As 1974 was a great year for sports on WSUA, the station was marred by constant equipment failures ultimately leading to a brief period of student apathy at the campus station. The failure of proper equipment made it difficult to recruit sufficient on-air personnel and WSUA came dangerously close to going dark. For a few months until the turmoil could be straightened out, **Patrick McGlynn** became one of the few, if not the *only*, on-air personality at the station and de facto general manager. Pat did marathon air shifts, often 18 to 24 hours long, to keep the station going until someone emerged to resuscitate it.

In the fall of 1974, during General Manager **Mary Lindsay**'s administration, the first applications for an FM license, drafted by General Manager **David Galletly**, were filed with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), with assistance and expertise from **Educational FM Associates**. The ball was handed off to **Eric "Osborne" Goldstein** with Chief Engineer **Jeff Ronner** and News Director **Paul Rosenthal** helping to realize the dream of bringing the radio station to the airwaves.

During 1975, SUNY Central officials saw the light once financial support from Student Association was forthcoming. An engineering consulting firm was retained to complete the licensing requirements. The final FM application was formally filed with the FCC in mid-1975 as WSUA-FM. It was formally approved on August 13, 1976, designating 90.9FM to be home for the UAlbany FM radio station.

In early 1977, the FCC approved the use of the call letters **WCDB (Capital District Broadcasting)**. The FCC construction permit was approved in 1977 and Harris A Sanders Architects was chosen to design the new FM facilities. While much progress had been made, station executives still faced several additional hurdles. One was getting Student Association approval for additional space for the new facilities. WCDB asked to expand into a third-floor lounge adjacent to the WSUA-AM studios. At first Student Association balked, but eventually acquiesced.

Another challenge WSUA/WCDB executives faced was getting the University Administration – which allocated space in the Campus Center, – to sign-off on non-parallel walls for the studios. Construction began once this was approved. The **J.J. Keenan Construction Co.** and **Kasselman Electric** of Albany helped transform the AM radio station into its current FM operation. Student Association provided more than \$70,000 with another \$12,000 contributed by the university for start-up costs.

Jerry Jones, a staff engineer at UAlbany's Educational Communications Center until his retirement in 1996 and the station's FCC First-Class license holder-of-record, was crucial in achieving full legal compliance for the station. SUNY Central Administration currently holds the radio license for WCDB.

A point of trivia that some would find interesting: WCDB's antenna is situated atop Eastman Tower on State Quad because a SUNY Albany professor, **Dr. Bernard Vonnegut**, had complained about other possible locations.

SIGNING ON THE AIR FOR THE FIRST TIME

In 1978, WCDB received final FCC authorization to begin broadcasting. On **Wednesday, March 1, 1978**, WCDB began its dynasty by broadcasting at 10 watts over a five-mile radius from the uptown university campus. **Paul Rosenthal** was elected the first General Manager of WCDB.

Paul kicked off the station's inaugural broadcast with a 10-minute introduction, which included comments by Neil C. Brown, Dean of Student Affairs and the first high-ranking administration official to speak on WCDB. Paul congratulated his predecessor, **Eric "Osborne" Goldstein** for "performing feats of miraculous proportions to get the station on the air." Paul signed the station on the air with the words: ***This is WCDB broadcasting for the very first time on program test authorization granted by the Federal Communications Commission to the State University of New York.***

WCDB's first D.J., **Jim Saturno**, played Bruce Springsteen's "**Born to Run**" over the airwaves as the university Carillon played the same song – ringing in a new era in UAlbany radio broadcasting. Unfortunately, transmission and signal problems plagued the station in its early hours, which required that it be taken off the air for several hours. Chief Engineer **Ira Goldstein** persevered for many hours through the first night to clean up the signal and make it clear for the listeners to hear the music from the new radio station.

Mike Fischer, with Paul reading the news, hosted to the joy of all station personnel.

WCDB's first morning show with a clear signal, much

Shortly after graduating in 1978, Paul, a news junkie, became a research producer with NBC Radio Network News and then began to develop his skills in the network's marketing department. He also married his college sweetheart Cheryl Rademaker and moved to Long Island.

On a sad and poignant note, on March 1, 1982, WCDB's fourth anniversary, Paul went to Boston alone and took his own life two days later. He was 25 years old. Even though many of us did not know Paul, we were all touched by the legacy he left during his brief life. He is looking down at us from heaven; proud to see we are all here remembering the history of radio at the University.

The focus of programming for the new FM radio station was news, sports, and all types of music, ranging from jazz to hard rock. Election coverage, regularly scheduled newscasts, remotes of sporting events and the 24-hour coverage of "*Telethon*," were the hallmarks of the first several years of WCDB. During the 1980s, WCDB held "*Rock 'n Roll Night at the Rafters*" near Saratoga Springs.

While Paul was the first General Manager of WCDB, he only remained in that position for a few months, since he graduated in May of 1978 and the station sign-on was two months earlier. One of Paul's executive decisions was to create the position of Station Manager to be a "second-in-command" to the General Manager, as an appointed position. The position of General Manager was an elected post. That decision was short-lived during the next administration and the title of Station Manager was changed to Program Director.

Paul fielded a top-notch, streamlined executive team to help him transition the station from the AM carrier current to FM airwaves. The first executive team at WCDB included: **Mark Bernstein**, station manager; **Rich Schenkman**, program director; **Neil Siegel**, music director; **Ira Goldstein**, chief engineer; **Mark Plevin**, sports director; **Debbie Kass**, news director and **Dave Reisman**, production director. As Dave took over the reins of WCDB, after being elected as the first full-term General Manager, he created the position of promotions director, which was filled by **Rich Schenkman**. **Paul Heneghan** became the program director, **Mark Shilling** assumed the position of news director and **Brian Sullivan** was operations director.-

Once WCDB established a regular programming schedule, WSUA served as a training ground for new students who wanted to be on the air but needed to learn how to operate the equipment and be cleared before going on the FM station. During the mid to late 80s, WSUA ceased functioning and its last studio is now a storage and production room.

WCDB gained national attention in 1980 and 1984 when **Marc Gronich** spearheaded the **Election Night College Network (ENCN)** with News Director **Steve Gross**, **Pete Sgro**, Chief Engineer **Steve Otruba**, News Director **Glenn Mones**, News Director **Phillip Chonigman** and **Tim Wallace** among a cast of other talented individuals at the young FM station. ENCEN brought together 41 college radio stations from across the country to share election night news reports from a student perspective about the U.S. Senate, Congressional and Presidential races in each state. When a station filed a news report, it was able to receive a taped news report from a different state. Student Association supported the endeavor by making its office space and phone lines available for the evening. Seven hours of coverage was flawlessly produced in 1980 and in 1984.

In 1981, steps were taken to boost WCDB's power from 10 to 100 watts. Under General Manager **James Diamond**, the initial FCC application for the step up was filed. WAMC-FM radio, a nearby station on the radio dial, quickly opposed the wattage increase. In the summer of 1982, thanks to the perseverance of General Manager **Bill Goodfriend** and Chief Engineers **Steve Otruba** and **L. Mark Stone**, the FCC approved WCDB's

application after a successful showing that WAMC's signal would not be infringed nor its audience reach diminished. The first song played with the increased wattage was ***“Rock and Roll”*** by the **Velvet Underground**.

WCDB began broadcasting as 91FM, but as the years passed and analog gave way to digital technology, the radio station moved on to calling itself 90.9FM instead.

In 1987, the concert venue QE2 donated WCDB's first CD player. Reel-to-reel machines were on their way out at the station and the more modern digital equipment was being sought.

In 1992, WCDB began a full facility renovation program, beginning with rebuilding its master control studio. The following year the station purchased its first digital audio tape recorder and a new seven-second delay allowed listener call-in shows to be aired live for the first time.

On **December 13, 1996**, **Joe Schepis** launched an unofficial WCDB website, entitled the WCDB Historical Society. You can find this site by going to listen.to/wcdb or www.joefm.com/wcdb. During Joe's years at the radio station he was the production director, training coordinator and an engineer.

On **September 20, 1997**, the official WCDB website debuted. It was created by **Jerem Curry** and updated several times since its inception. You can find this site by going to www.albany.edu/~wcdb. The website is currently being maintained by **Frank Starker**.

After more than a decade of trying to become modernized, WCDB's production studio entered the 21st Century and went “all digital” with computer disc recording and editing equipment. The long-standing cart machines went the way of the 8-track cartridges of the 60s and 70s and are replaced by MiniDisc technology. The station also primarily uses compact discs (CDs) instead of vinyl records and has a computer to keep track of programming.

On **Sunday, January 17, 1999**, WCDB launched its first Internet webcast. The first program transmitted via the Internet is **Talk Show '91** at 8pm.

On **Monday, January 28, 2002**, WCDB signed on with a new transmitter and a new antenna atop Eastman Tower at State Quad.

For the future we could see more equipment upgrades, more square footage and the hopes of another increase in wattage.

Twenty-five years of broadcasting from a fledgling student-owned and operated radio station, first at 10 watts and now at 100 watts, with no faculty oversight and no interference from the University administration almost seems incomprehensible. The radio station receives some financial support and much moral support from the Student Association but there has always primarily remained a hands-off policy.